Disinformation from the White House

For anybody who saw the remarkable unscheduled press conference of the new White House Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, it was an astonishing event and worth watching in full. Was it spontaneous and based on unfavourable reporting? Or was it a pre-planned part of the new administration's media strategy?

The statement was a lecture to the media on inaccurate reporting. It began with the 'deliberately false reporting' of the removal bust of Martin Luther King from the Oval office by Zeke Miller, a Time journalist. This was not true and Miller corrected by deleting the original tweet and producing another tweet retracting it. This is likely to be misinformation: that is misreporting due to bias/incomplete information. Miller's explanation is that that the bust was obscured and he could not see it. His own biases made him more likely to believe that the new administration would remove it and with the low effort cost of a tweet he reported it.

The rest of the press conference Spicer harangued the reporting of crowd sizes for the inauguration. Spicer attempted to reframe the crowd size using reasonable rhetoric, but contradicted himself in consecutive sentences. He said '… the National Park Service which controls the National Mall does not put any [numbers] out' followed by 'This was the largest audience to witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe'. Aerial pictures from the back clearly showed smaller crowds than Obama's in 2008 and 2012. The size of Trump's crowd should not be important. Washington DC is a heavily Democratic city and plenty of people did show up. This was likely to be disinformation: deliberately stating information that you know already to be false. The White House would have had access to the same aerial photographs and accurate estimates of crowd sizes as well as accurate records of DC metro riders.

The remainder of the statement covered Trump's CIA visit, and Spicer again accused the media of 'sowing false narratives'.

Why would a new press secretary, at his first event, declare something that was demonstrably false? Why would the new administration, on their second full day even go to the effort of arranging an unscheduled press statement just to say this?

The first thing to note is that the new administration is willing to go on air and tell us that up is down. Because the conference began with the MLK bust it allows Trump supporters to compare the two sets of false reporting. Both the MLK bust and crowd size stories originated from traditional media. That the MLK bust story was a single journalist acting in haste would not matter. The new administration seems to be pushing the narrative that traditional media is not able to report the activities of the new administration fairly or accurately. Spicer stated that 'they we're gonna hold the media accountable '. This is a continuation of the campaign, with favourable Trump reporting only coming from extreme right-wing organisations, such as Fox News and Bretibart.

This statement heralds a new era of White House-press relations. The new administration is sending out the message to Trump supporters that you cannot trust traditional media outlets, even for basic facts, when it comes to reporting on it. The flip side to this is that it is implied whom you *can* trust. Media organisations that support Trump will be able to show parts of this press conference to their audiences to increase distrust in anti-Trump reporting. Trump supporters will tweet and fill message boards with their versions of the event, as well as posting them to facebook, as we saw during the election campaign.

However, I believe this statement is part of a broader strategy at work from the White House. To explain this I think there are two competing hypotheses to explain this event.

In the first, what I would call the accidental hypothesis, an impromptu press event was held to address the President's frustrations with bad media coverage. In this hypothesis, the Trump administration is not competent in its media relations, throwing Spicer to the hounds on his first day. The tone and substance of the event were set by the administration's general distrust of media and the President's annoyance at his coverage. The evidence for this hypothesis is Trump's limited ability to control his ego and the

importance he places in ratings and crowds; a repeated theme of his campaign. In the CIA address on Saturday this appears to be quite apparent. The other key evidence is that the new administration appears to be a little disorganized. Sub-cabinet appointments are still missing, reflecting a lack of organization of the overall transition team. From the top, Trump's stream of consciousness public speaking is easy to imagine translating in private to impulsive decision making.

In the second, or what I would call the calculated hypothesis, this statement was actually a pre-meditated event and part of a broader media strategy. In this hypothesis this press statement was not a response at all to either the MLK bust story or the crowd size story. It was an event planned for the first days of office where the rough tone was fixed and the content sought later. Bad coverage or Trump was likely: media outlets that were critical of Trump prior to his inauguration would continue to be skeptical. With hundreds of those outlet's journalists tweeting one tweet was bound to catch their eye. The main evidence for this hypothesis is based on statements and quotes we have from Trump and his staff. The key quote is that Spicer said the White House was going to use press events to 'hold media accountable', which came after his two examples of media bias. This is consistent with the tone of both the Inaugural address and the PEOTUS press conference in which Trump called CNN 'fake news'. This would also be consistent with a media strategy planned by Senior Counselor to the President Steve Bannon.

The differences in the accidental and calculated hypothesis may in reality be fuzzier. Trump could well have been upset by the reporting of his inauguration, and in a bout of opportunism, the team used an impromptu press event to couple the boss's orders with their media strategy. It is also possible that the carefully calculated strategy didn't quite go as planned in Spicer's delivery on what was after all his first day.

On weighing the evidence, I think the second, or calculated hypothesis, (or a similar version), is more likely. We have seen the administration attempting to present a credible alternative narrative to events described in traditional media, or what Kellyanne Conway dubbed 'alternative facts'. I do not find these alternatives credible, but I am not the intended audience. Don't like the pictures showing smaller crowds? Well here's another

picture and analysis. Don't like how the traditional media is reporting Trump? Well go to infowars, Fox Breitbart, or just twitter. The activist left is misinterpreting what is happening. A tweet from the anti-Putin activist and former Chess player Gary Kasperov commented that 'Obvious lies serve a purpose for an administration. The watch who challenges them and who loyally repeats them.' The temptation is to make a straight comparison with 1984: "The Party told you to reject all evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command". That is not, what I believe is happening.

This strategy could have serious negative consequences for both the Trump administration and the society in the United States. First, regardless of either hypothesis, Spicer's, credibility with traditional media outlets has been seriously damaged and may never recover. In the calculated hypothesis this is intentional. This would serve to *increase* Spicer's credibility with anti-establishment causes.

We do not yet know if the Trump administration can go for four years with unfavourable reporting from traditional media. History would say this makes the administration's job harder, but we are in a new media landscape. However, according to the calculated hypothesis, the strategy to undermine the credibility of traditional media amongst your supporters from day one, may work well in long run by containing negative reporting. This would in fact be the main goal of the calculated strategy.

Second, regardless of either hypothesis, this erosion in trust will cause future reports by the administration to be distrusted by large swathes of civil society. At a times of crisis the nation may well require a unified response and belief in government. A lack of credibility from the White House could make this impossible. To be clear this would include disasters such as terrorist attacks, both domestic and foreign as well as US conduct overseas. These areas are where governments are key sources of information that are hard to replicate via other sources. In the more mundane everyday matters of government, the reporting of official statistics may be undermined.

Of course every administration seeks to reframe issues to its benefit, control the news cycle and set the agenda. What we witnessed on Sunday is something else.